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SUBJECT: THE HOA HAO TODAY

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¶11. (SBU) Summary: The religious freedom situation facing the more than one million mainstream Hoa Hao continues to improve since GVN recognition in 1999, as evidenced by the open religious gathering in An Giang province attended by 50,000-70,000 followers in January. The vast majority of Hoa Hao today have distanced themselves from their militant roots and practice their faith openly and freely. Two small groups of unrecognized Hoa Hao, comprised primarily of pre-1975 militants, continue to experience harassment by local authorities. Reliable Consulate contacts debunked reports of harassment of Hoa Hao followers in An Giang province that appeared on dissident blogs as being greatly exaggerated by the former chairman of the unrecognized Pure Hoa Hao Church, Le Quang Liem -- an advocate of self-immolation who represents a small and declining number of Hoa Hao in Vietnam. End summary.

Reports of Harassment Exaggerated

¶12. (SBU) Post followed up with reliable contacts - including a member of one of the unsanctioned Hoa Hao churches - in response to Internet reports on dissident blogs alleging that thousands of Hoa Hao demonstrators were being beaten by police in An Giang province on February 19 during a protest over the dissemination of marred images of Hoa Hao founder Huynh Phu So. Our contact confirmed that the protest occurred, but noted it only involved 40 to 50 followers of the unrecognized Pure Hoa Hao still loyal to former leader (and noted pre-1975 militant) Le Quang Liem. The eyewitness refuted the Internet claims that individuals were arrested or beaten; the police tried to prevent one follower from taking pictures of the rally, which resulted in a minor altercation. The rally took place in front of the An Giang Printing Company to protest the apparently accidental distribution of photocopies that depicted Hoa Hao founder Huynh Phu So's image as blurry and scratched.

¶13. (SBU) Our contact explained that the officially recognized Hoa Hao Church had ordered prints of the founder, but rejected the order due to poor print quality. The An Giang Printing Company then sold the rejected order as waste paper. When waste paper wrappers with Huynh's image began to surface, the Pure Hoa Hao decried the incident as an effort by the authorities to discredit the Hoa Hao faith and defame the founder. The management of the An Giang Paper Company promptly issued an apology to the official Hoa Hao executive board, but the unsanctioned Hoa Hao have not accepted the apology and plan to file a lawsuit against the company. Our contact, who broke with Liem several years ago due to Liem's advocacy of self-immolation

as a method of protest, said Liem exaggerated the details of the incident and posted them on the Internet in order to gain more sympathy for his faction of the unrecognized Hoa Hao.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: The over one million mainstream members of the Hoa Hao church continue to experience increasingly religious freedoms and liberties since registration in 1999. Not surprisingly, the few, unrecognized members of the Hoa Hao church, especially those that have become active in opposition politics and who advocate violence as a means of opposing the government, continue to experience difficulties with local authorities. End comment.

Hoa Hao Mainstream Flourishing

¶5. (SBU) The vast majority of Hoa Hao today have distanced themselves from their militant roots and practice their faith freely. The official Hoa Hao Church was recognized by the GVN in 1999, and the current number of followers is estimated to be 1.3 million, primarily in the Delta region. A deputy on the Executive Board told ConGenOff that 50,000 to 70,000 pilgrims joined in the celebration of founder Huynh Phu So's birthday in January at his ancestral home in An Hoa Tu, An Giang. The GVN no longer prohibits the display of Huynh's image and the Executive Board had been ordering prints from the An Giang Paper Company for five years without incident. The church has published some, but not all, of the Hoa Hao sacred literature. (The representative noted they did not publish "inappropriate" texts dealing with homeopathic medical practices and the group's former political leanings). Though the government confiscated a

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number of Hoa Hao properties after the war, the Executive Board is not inclined to press the GVN for their return.

¶6. (SBU) Founded in 1939 by peasant farmer Huynh Phu So in the Delta border region of Chau Doc (now An Giang Province), the Hoa Hao faith is said to be a continuation of the Buu Son Ky Huong (Mysterious Fragrance of the Precious Mountains) tradition which originated in the 19th century near the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Religious adherents practice simple rites conducted at home, eschewing elaborate ceremonies and highly decorated temples in favor of giving more aid to the poor. Early Hoa Hao followers also closely linked religion and patriotism, with duty to the nation being a central tenet of the faith. This led to the formation of Hoa Hao village security forces that developed into armed militias who, like the Cao Dai, were among the first to fight against occupation by French and Japanese forces. The Hoa Hao became a powerful, independent force during the late 50's and 60's, opposing both the communist-led National Liberation Front and President Ngo Dinh Diem

. A Time magazine article from 1955 chronicling a Delta raid on the Hoa Hao by Diem's troops characterized the Hoa Hao as a "rowdy private army of Buddhist dissidents who run their own feudal entity." Infighting between sects eventually led to the demise of the notorious Hoa Hao General, Ba Cut, and the end of the Hoa Hao's militarism.

¶7. (SBU) A small number of Hoa Hao refused to join the government-approved group in 1999, and formed a splinter sect called the Central Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, or the Pure Hoa Hao. Lead by former militant Le Quang Liem, the Pure Hoa Hao advocate self-immolation as a means of protest against the GVN. In 2005, two Pure Hoa Hao adherents self-immolated during clashes with the police, and Liem also threatened to set himself

on fire in front of the Consulate. As a result of their anti-GVN views and radical actions (including one incident where a Hoa Hao leader and several Hoa Hao members assaulted police officers and splashed gasoline on a female security officer during a rally), several members of the Pure Hoa Hao were arrested in 2005.

¶8. (SBU) In 2007, Liem appeared to step back from his leadership role and post received very few reports from him or his faction.

Some Hoa Hao contacts speculated that Liem was trying to reach a settlement with the GVN and had requested the return of his pre-1975 headquarters or \$30 million VND (approximately \$1500 USD) in compensation. Contacts said this move discredited him in the eyes of his followers, leading many to leave and form another group called the Traditional Hoa Hao, which disavows violence and the practice of self-immolation. (Note: Members of the Traditional Hoa Hao met with USCIRF in 2007 and 2009. End note.) But Liem issued a declaration in January vowing to resume his activism and renew his commitment to fight for freedom. Liem is also a member of the dissident political group Bloc 8406 and an advisor to the Vietnam Political and Religious Prisoner Friendship Association (Note: This group includes several well-known anti-GVN dissidents like Dr. Nguyen Dan Que and UBCV leader Thich Quang Do. End note.) The declaration called on all Pure Hoa Hao to be prepared to sacrifice their lives and assets in pursuit of their cause.

¶9. (SBU) Though some Hoa Hao followers have distanced themselves from Liem, unrecognized members continue to report surveillance and harassment by security forces, especially during religious events or commemoration days. Pure Hoa Hao Buddhists in An Giang reported that a force of 100 police and officials surrounded their unrecognized pagoda during the January birth anniversary of Hoa Hao's founder and prevented adherents from gathering. Hoa Hao leaders also reported receiving warnings from police not to leave their homes. One adherent in Vinh Long province said she is questioned by police whenever she tries to hold religious ceremonies and that the altar and Hoa Hao flag she erected at her home were torn down in December 2009. Another follower in Dong Thap province said police prevented guests from attending his mother's one year death anniversary in November 2009, adding that he was so frustrated, he threatened to self immolate.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.

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